

Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece

Joan Breton Connelly

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In this sumptuously illustrated book, Joan Breton Connelly gives us the first comprehensive cultural history of priestesses in the ancient Greek world. Connelly presents the fullest and most vivid picture yet of how priestesses lived and worked, from the most famous and sacred of them--the Delphic Oracle and the priestess of Athena Polias--to basket bearers and handmaidens. Along the way, she challenges long-held beliefs to show that priestesses played far more significant public roles in ancient Greece than previously acknowledged.

Connelly builds this history through a pioneering examination of archaeological evidence in the broader context of literary sources, inscriptions, sculpture, and vase painting. Ranging from southern Italy to Asia Minor, and from the late Bronze Age to the fifth century A.D., she brings the priestesses to life--their social origins, how they progressed through many sacred roles on the path to priesthood, and even how they dressed. She sheds light on the rituals they performed, the political power they wielded, their systems of patronage and compensation, and how they were honored, including in death. Connelly shows that understanding the complexity of priestesses' lives requires us to look past the simple lines we draw today between public and private, sacred and secular.

The remarkable picture that emerges reveals that women in religious office were not as secluded and marginalized as we have thought--that religious office was one arena in ancient Greece where women enjoyed privileges and authority comparable to that of men. Connelly concludes by examining women's roles in early Christianity, taking on the larger issue of the exclusion of women from the Christian priesthood. This paperback edition includes additional maps and a glossary for student use.

Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece Details

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
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From Reader Review Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece for online ebook

Sheila says

an excellent new view of the role of women in the ancient world - and the illustrations are great

Chris says

An essential read for anyone writing about Classical Greece.

Brittany says

A fantastic look at every aspect of priestess in ancient Greece and Rome. It made me realize that most of my beliefs about women in ancient Greece and Rome needed to change, and in fact because of religion women were much freer than once believed.

Beluosus says

Full of good information and luscious pictures of pots/stelae/statues/&c., but the modern academic writing style made me grit my teeth the whole way. Observe:

"A further inspiration or the title is my wish to underscore the narrative quality of the material presented. The fragments of sculpture, paintings, inscriptions, and texts gathered here preserve stories of lived experience. They are not just distant data onto which we can project the concerns and agendas of our own times, but are robust survivors of authentic ancient narratives to which we should, instead, listen."

Jaclyn says

Scholars in recent memory have almost universally concluded that ancient Greek women were marginalized, silent, almost invisible and confined to their households and to their roles as wives and mothers. While this may have been true in some cases, Joan Breton Connelly convincingly disproves this hypothesis in the case of a notable exception - the role of women in religious ritual. Connelly begins with the hypothesis that through participation in cult service, ancient Greek women were able to attain power and influence within the polis. She delineates significant evidence for the existence of priestesses and attributes modern scholarship's dismissal of this group to two seemingly divergent factors: Victorian sensibilities that considered women of lesser status, and feminists of the 1970s whose worldviews had been shaped by a male-dominated society. Connelly explains that not only did priestesses exist, but they were extremely influential. Ancient Greek priestesses came from the wealthiest and most aristocratic families of the Greek city-states and could be appointed, selected from a lottery (although even the lottery was only open to the

most aristocratic candidates) or even purchased their religious offices. The cults were organized in a clearly demarcated hierarchy, from little girls who, as new initiates, served small roles as temple attendants, to priestesses of the most venerated shrines, such as Athena Polias or Demeter and Kore. The head priestess of a cult such as Athena Polias or Demeter and Kore would be expected to make significant financial contributions, and Connelly explains that these contributions often came from the priestess's private means, or, even if a female priesthood was financed through the priestess's male relatives, she seemed to have no trouble in accessing the money. With the financial expectations came significant remuneration. Priestesses were honored for their service, "as a good woman deserves," through financial compensation, the right to collect duties and penalties, a share in all sacrificial offerings to the goddess the priestess served, (often) a public coronation, reserved seats in the front row of the theater and sporting events, and the right to argue legal cases before the city's governing body. Priestesses were honored and revered during their lifetimes and commemorated after their deaths with lavish funerals and tombs, as well as portrait statues dedicated in a priestess's memory and given pride of place either in the sanctuary she served or in some public location. Using evidence from literature, historical documents, and uncovered statuary and other artifacts, Connelly portrays Greek priestesses as powerful, vocal women who occupied great prestige and exercised considerable influence in their communities.

Molly says

Disappointingly dull, ponderous, and tedious. The book itself is beautiful visually, but the contents leave much to be desired. Dry, academic style of writing and surprisingly little fresh or interesting content given the length and literal heaviness of the book. It does provide ample evidence for the role and value of the priestess in Ancient Greece, information which likely could have been condensed quite nicely into a twenty page journal article.

Heather O'Brien says

This is a gorgeous book! Not only is it insightful, it provides detailed and beautiful artwork and photos of archaeological finds. The hardcover edition is a big book, appropriately sized for a coffee table if one should choose.

Jill says

I loved this book. Perhaps, at least partially, because it purported a theory I've held myself; namely that women in Ancient Greece had more of a life outside of the home than we have been led to understand. It is worth noting, however, that by far most of the evidence for this is from the 5th Century BCE through the Hellenistic and even Roman times. There is little evidence before that.

Citing the literary evidence; plays, poems and fragments of other writings, concerning a variety of female dominated religious festivals, the author makes the case that women were not only active outside of the oikos but also honored and respected. Most of the epigraphic evidence cited is for priestesses but those women, while from well-to-do and respected families, were more numerous than one would think. Those positions often experienced frequent turnover.

Beyond the persuasive text, this title has stunning illustrations. It is full of photos, drawings, and images that support the author's inescapable conclusions.

Mariya says

NO

Briana Grenert says

There were some bad things about this book, and some good. The bad first:

I can't say that I enjoyed reading this. I did not. It was a little painful. Often times it was overkill. Connelly spent pages and pages talking about how priestesses carried temple keys. Delving into the visual record was interesting, but after four vases and three steles I was done: I began to lose focus and skyme because I was not really absorbing information anymore. The writing style was usually nice, but it got irritating at times for no particular reason. A lot of the opinions where well voiced however it annoyed me that she would present her own interpretations (or interpretations she agrees with is more accurate) then present the opposition then back up her own opinions but fail to provide any rebuttal/evidence for the other interpretation's reasoning. This is a good tactic, and it does not make her points any less valid, however it irritated me because it made the study look more objective than it was. Another thing I had a problem with was how casually she referred to a lot of Greek terms and made Grecian references without explaining them. Maybe this book was just too far over my level, but an example of what I mean is when she mentions hetaera and their festival as an example of something or other she does not explain to us lay people what hetaera are. I only remember that instance because I actually know about hetaera and was proud for getting to reference. It also bugged me that the notes and bib were half the size of the actual book, but in hindsight that was actually a good think, right? Finally, I must admit I am disappointed. I was hoping for a book that would help me see into all aspects of a Priestess's life, but most specifically what they do on a daily basis and how they interact with other temple personnel. Where do they live? Ect.

All that being said, you would think I would give it a one star. And honestly this staring was hard because all that said, it was a two. But there are some aspects of this book that are worthy of five stars.

The good:

First, on my disappointment, I need to understand that the kind of information I am looking for is probably lost in time. Also, despite the fact that it made many references I could not catch it managed not to go over my head. I understood what I was reading, even if I did not understand every example. Connelly did a fantastic job of working with the material she had to form a conclusive picture of what it was like to be a Priestess. She addresses the major duties of Feminine Sacred Servants and gives lots of details where they are available. It is an awesome compilation of resources and I feel that after reading it I understand Greek religion and cult practices much better. It will be very useful. Connelly does a great job of "signposting" and this book is very organized. IT was easy to take notes from and I could skip things that I knew would be of no use to me. I am happy I read it and it was well worth the time I poured into it. There were lots of pictures and stories which made life easier. I appreciate that when she was guessing or unable to solidly prove an idea/interpretation with definitive evidence that she flat out said so. I also appreciate that she used a wealth of sources.

Read it, but keep a dictionary and google on hand.
